

| Haitian Heritages and the Need to Foster Cultural Diversity

by Samuel Régulus

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A belief in Haitian heritage, despite the fact that the country's recent history is beleaguered by a series of 'protean crises',¹ is a belief in Haiti's ability to generate cultural property which can be mobilized in the present to contribute to a positive vision of the future, bearing the promise of improvement in the life of its people. Contrary to some schools of thought, investment in the heritage of Haiti is not a second-rate or a purely philanthropic activity. Rather, it is a way to construct and reaffirm identity, to restore the identity of Haitian women and men based on the principles of choice of memory. This should be an effective way of developing a feeling of belonging to the country, and of reducing the brain drain and capital flight.

Heritage objects are shaped by social and ideological considerations, and consequently they come to light more easily and more visibly in some places and contexts than in others (Turgeon, 2003). Their lifespan and significance also depend on the changing values and actions of succeeding generations and interest groups (Nique, 2008, p. 9). In a country such as Haiti, where tolerance

and dialogue historically struggled to take root, it would seem to be an ethical imperative to work at promoting the recognition of ‘cultural diversity’.² In certain situations, not to recognize this diversity could be a violation of human dignity. By contrast, affirming diversity is a statement of a desire for ‘harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities, as well as their willingness to live together’.³ This article will try to highlight the complexity of meanings and values present in Haitian heritage, owing to the multiple viewpoints that shape the relationships within Haiti’s varied cultural inheritance.

The components of Haitian heritage

The first factors shaping Haiti’s heritage are its physical site and situation. Haiti is more insular than the Dominican Republic, with which it shares the island of Quisqueya (the Taino name for Hispaniola). Its geography gives it a natural heritage that is quite unique in the Caribbean. Three-quarters of its spectacular, rugged landscape is covered with mountains and a quarter with plains, surrounded by 1,535 km of coast. This physical geography means that Haiti has a climate ranging from tropical to temperate, and very varied coastal ecosystems, including ecological niches, and thus a wide variety of plant and animal life. One of these niches is the ‘Little Paradise’ site at Anse-Rouge, which is home to endemic species. Macaya Park is another important site, with an annual rainfall of nearly 3,000 mm, feeding the two largest irrigation systems of the southern peninsula: Avezac and Dubreuil. Many rare or endemic species of flora and fauna are found in the park.

These include 102 species of ferns (3 of them endemic), 141 varieties of orchids (38 endemic), 99 species of moss and 367 other varieties of flowering plants (55 of which are endemic). The park is also home to two endemic land mammals, the Hispaniolan hutia (a rodent, *Plagiodontia aedium*) and the Hispaniolan solednodon or agouta (*Solenodon paradoxus*), as well as 65 of Haiti’s total of 230 birds, 57 species of molluscs and 11 of butterflies, including the endemic *Calisto loxias* (Jerome, 2008; cf. Bissereth, 2006). In addition to these elements of Haiti’s natural heritage are waterfalls and lakes, as well as islands and islets in the Caribbean Sea. Seventy per cent of Haiti’s surface is composed of steeply sloping, mountainous karst areas (cave-forming rocks), giving rise to deep caves and complex cave networks. One study has revealed over 150 caves spread around the country (Testa and Devilliers, 2009). These natural caves resonate with the spiritual searchings of the different people groups who have lived in Haiti.

Most of Haiti’s vast range of movable heritage is acquired, safeguarded, protected and displayed in museums and other heritage institutions. The other part of the country’s tangible heritage is its fixed heritage, including all types of urban and rural architecture. As well as archives and public and private collections, tangible heritage also includes artistic creations and craftwork, ethnological and archaeological objects and commemorative and funeral monuments (Limouzin, 2008, pp. 20–21). Cultural goods and heritage are often classified diachronically in three major periods: pre-Columbian, colonial and national.



14. Voodoo inspired arts and crafts displayed at *l'Artisanat en fête* in October 2010.

The intangible component of Haiti's cultural heritage covers ephemeral forms of cultural expression such as language (Creole/French), oral traditions and also the beliefs and values that give Haitian culture its vitality.⁴ This category comprises legends, folk tales, popular beliefs, myths, songs, music, dance, culinary traditions, art and crafts, and traditional skills. It also includes the memory of places and historical sites, celebrations and popular or religious events, such as the Port-au-Prince or Jacmel Carnival, the Holy Week processions in Léogane and Artibonite, public Voodoo rituals and Catholic saints' days.

The concept of heritage is polysemic and dynamic. This is particularly true in Haiti. Each generation has its own needs and expectations and thus will change, increase and redefine the different components included in heritage.

Consequently, a given heritage object can be given different meanings and weight by different generations and stakeholders. Moreover, three givens in Haitian life – devotion to freedom, the cult of the heroes of independence, and Haitian Voodoo – are obviously in very different registers, and this shows the complexity of meanings and values present in Haitian heritage.

Devotion to freedom and the cult of the heroes of independence

In 1904, during the centenary celebrations for independence in Haiti, President Nord Alexis said:

Haitians, one hundred years ago today, our ancestors, having broken the chains of slavery on the heads of their



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masters, swore to the universe that they would live independently or die. During these hundred years, we have preserved this heritage, the deeds of which were written in blood and shackles, and we must hand it down intact to our descendants.

(Célius, 2004, p. 214, emphasis added)

The concept of heritage referred to here is rich in implications and allusions that refer back to historical realities steeped in prejudice, suffering and trauma. It also includes elements that, in the collective memory, represent glory for some and humiliation for others. On one side there is celebration; on the other, revulsion (Le Goff, 1998, p. 435). This celebration is a ritual against forgetting. It holds the meaning of a duty of remembrance for the exceptional deeds of the

founding fathers of the nation of Haiti, who, after defeating Napoleon's army,⁵ created the first independent black republic in the world. During the consolidation phase of this victory, the deep attachment of our ancestors to the universality of the values of freedom bequeathed us the Citadel Henry. This military structure is a political statement, and one of the best examples of the art of early nineteenth-century military engineers. According to the International Committee for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), it is the largest fortress in the Caribbean.⁶

Because of its unique history, Haiti both astonishes people and frightens them. Some have described it as heaven, others as hell. Very few countries have had as many attackers as defenders, as many critics as admirers. No one is indifferent to Haiti. It is a land of constant new discoveries, which are different for each



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15. Voodoo prayer around a *milokan*, a large sacred drawing or representation of all Voodoo gods.

individual (Gauthier, 1997, p. 56). Although for abolitionists and revolutionaries the Haitian revolution was a complete and total proof of humanity, for others, with the widespread prejudices of that time, it was also seen as a proof of savagery, brought about by mutiny. When the Haitian revolution is mentioned in French novels, Africans and their descendants are portrayed either as monsters who are hardly human or as servile domestics who are as faithful as dogs (Hoffmann, 1992, pp. 20–24). Even

today some people still bypass any contrary arguments and mistakenly believe that Haiti's political and ecological disasters are the logical conclusion of an independence that was premature, hasty and, frankly, pointless (Théodat, 2004, p. 270).

As we saw earlier, a country's relationship to its heritage changes with different generations. Until the first half of the twentieth century Haitians were strongly attached to freedom and the



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16. Jacmel carnival parade (2008).



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17. Rara dancers in Léogane (2007).

cult of heroes, as is clear from the number of monuments, historical relics and statues. However, today this memory is poorly protected and thus threatened, as is our natural heritage. These days the sole aim in life for most young Haitians is to ‘get a visa at any price and say goodbye to Haiti’. After the earthquake on 12 January 2010 many people suggested that this heritage should be rejected symbolically and wanted the country to be placed under the protection of the United States. Although heritage is an instrument of identity (Régulus, 2010, p. 205), it remains fragile, and time, which has produced it, can also destroy it. Consequently, Haiti’s legacy to world heritage could disappear.

Haitian Voodoo

At present, the Haitian government officially recognizes Voodoo as an ancestral practice and a religion in its own right. As such, it is an essential component of Haiti’s national identity.⁷ In this same spirit of recognition Samba El (Elien Isac), a Voodoo priest and presenter of the radio

programme *Kilti kreyòl* (‘Creole Culture’),⁸ has said that Voodoo also represents ‘world heritage’ in the sense that it incorporates into its system of communication a variety of elements of different origin. According to Samba El, all the major religious civilizations are represented in Voodoo, which was born out of the encounter between Europe and Africa in the New World.

The thesis of many Haitian intellectuals is recognizable in the declarations of this practising Voodoo priest. These thinkers have reassessed the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century value system, which, they believe, was responsible for the disasters of this period. With a view to stronger resistance against the policy of political and cultural assimilation that the English-speaking world was advising during the American occupation (1915–34), Haitian intellectuals have advocated recognition and acceptance of the whole Haitian collective personality. They have also reminded their fellow members of the national élite that the 80 per cent of Haitians who speak only Creole and practise Voodoo have created their own culture,

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and that this is the most authentic Haitian contribution to 'world cultural heritage' (Hoffmann, 1992, p. 41).

It is not difficult to prove the importance of Voodoo, both for the nation and for humanity. Voodoo is the result of a long process of recognition, ownership and transmission of the most traditional sense of the sacred for Haitians. It is also embodied in terms of remembrance, and dovetails with the memory of slavery and the Haitian revolution. It is closely associated with the wounds and trauma of the slaves who were to make up the majority of the Haitian population. Since it was associated with the mythical origins of the Haitian nation,⁹ Haitian Voodoo is undoubtedly a heritage in the historical sense, particularly as understood by Jacques Le Goff. Its unique, exemplary nature, apart from being a religious heritage, comes from its association with the memory of the slave trade and the role of slavery in the revolution (Régulus, 2010, p. 208).

When speaking of the presence of African-ness in Haiti, the anthropologist Guérin C. Montilus posits that African cultures formed the foundations of the Haitian personality, but that they are deeply buried in our subconscious (Montilus, 2009, p. 209). Through Voodoo and the Creole language this African-ness persists and gives shape to the cultural universe of Haitian society. At present, all Haitian art is inspired by it. According to Francine Barthe and Jean-Marie Théodat, Voodoo is becoming the most effective symbolic way of displaying the cultural specificity of Haiti. At the same time it also helps raise the profile of this small Caribbean country (Barthe and Théodat, 2007).

However, the more Voodoo is recognized in the public sphere, the more certain sections of religious society tend to reject it. As Laënnec Hurbon remarked (Hurbon, 2001, pp. 51–2), evangelists base their preaching on Voodoo beliefs and practices in order to obtain conversions to Baptist and Pentecostal forms of Protestantism. Their preaching harks back to the old mindset of demonizing others. This attitude of mind has fuelled several series of persecution campaigns against Voodoo, which is accused of being responsible for all of Haiti's ills. The eradication of Voodoo was also part of the work of cultural cleansing that Haiti's élite, who ran the country after 1804, asked the missionaries to carry out.¹⁰ Because they felt culturally and emotionally closer to France, and also for diplomatic reasons, the élite chose the Catholic Church as their religion and French as the official language. Thus, in the state set up by the élite, most legal measures (laws, decrees etc.) took no account of the customs and habits of the country. Such measures were simply copied from French examples, or sometimes from the USA (Madiou, 1988, p. 109). This ignoring of all that is home-grown and the preference for everything that comes from outside are still very prevalent in Haiti. This attitude has successfully infiltrated all of our major social institutions, such as government, the Church, schools, the family and the media.

This way of being, anchored in the old principles of the 'civilized' versus the 'barbarians', legitimates an understanding that is generally unfavourable to the majority of the expressions of Haitian cultural heritage, especially when they have any connection with Voodoo. Paintings, sculptures, dance and music, all the vestiges or

places of memory that evoke Voodoo, are discriminated against in a markedly theocentric attitude. During a field survey one painter told me once how he had to remove one of his paintings from a room so that a Protestant minister could begin a prayer session in the home, because the painting depicted a Voodoo scene. For many Haitian converts to Protestantism, the history of Haiti is rejected – especially the Bois Caiman episode,¹¹ when our ancestors signed a pact with the devil – and the biblical history of the people of Israel is substituted.

Finally, the issue of heritage in Haiti remains a subject for experts. The concepts of natural and cultural heritage and places of memory are strange terms for even the most educated Haitians. Developing a multiple culture of heritage, including minorities, in a context of dialogue and mutual understanding should be a vital enterprise for all thinking people who care about the future of Haiti. A heritage culture should be based on formal education for all and a refusal of religious dogmatism. As an important place for cultural mix in the Caribbean, thanks to this enterprise of citizenship, Haiti should preserve and foster the multifaceted nature of its culture as a source of innovation, creativity and communication, in both its internal and its external relations.

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| NOTES

1. Political crises, natural disasters and epidemics have helped create despair and a feeling of dilution of individual and national identity.
2. 'Cultural diversity refers to the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression. Cultural diversity is made manifest not only through the varied ways in which the cultural heritage of humanity is expressed, augmented and transmitted through the variety of cultural expressions, but also through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used.' UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, October 2005.
3. According to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted in 2001, immediately after 11 September.
4. Ephemeral in the act of expression.
5. Before Waterloo, the imperial authorities had ensured that this first defeat of one of Napoleon's armies and the loss of some forty soldiers who had formed the expeditionary corps sent to Saint-Dominique were kept almost entirely secret. The Haitian revolution is still not mentioned in history textbooks for primary and secondary schoolchildren. It is no exaggeration to say that most French people, no matter how well educated, are still unaware of what happened in their former colony. Moreover, writers in France are hesitant about mentioning a defeat of the imperial army by black slaves. See Hoffmann (2010), pp. 11–12, 35, 49.
6. According to the ICOMOS (International Committee for Monuments and Sites) assessment report in May 1982. Cf. *ISPAN Bulletin*, no. 11, 1 April 2010, pp. 1–3.
7. Presidential decree 'on the recognition by the Republic of Haiti of Voodoo as a religion in its own right throughout the country', 4 April 2003.
8. This radio presenter has a Voodoo programme broadcast every Saturday and Sunday from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. on a radio station called *Planèt kreyòl* ('Creole Planet').
9. The famous ceremony of Bois Caiman is often quoted as the origin of the nation of Haiti. According to this tradition, the Haitian revolution began in the night of 14 August 1791 in a place called Mezy. Bookman, a former fugitive and Voodoo priest, gave the signal for a general uprising preceding the major revolt of the slaves in the north, which soon spread over the whole island. Oral tradition reports that Voodoo played a predominant role in this attack, since the leaders were either Voodoo priests themselves, or consulted a *houngan* ('priest') or *manbo* ('priestess') before acting. It is said that Dessalines, the founder of the state of Haiti, was very devoted to Ogou (the Nago god of iron and war) and himself became a Voodoo deity.
10. Against Voodoo considered as the guardian of African-ness in Haiti.
11. UNESCO has made the 23rd August the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and of its Abolition.